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Susan E. Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity. Women and Gender in the Early Modern World*. Burlington, VT, and Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2006. x + 190 pp. Notes, chronology, maps, bibliography, appendices, and index. \$89.95 U.S./£45.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 0754655539.

Review by Linda Lierheimer, Hawai'i Pacific University.

The history of women during the Catholic Reformation is one of seemingly contradictory impulses. On the one hand, we have a story of order and control, beginning with the Council of Trent in 1563 which proclaimed that all religious women were to be enclosed and placed under the control of the local bishop. On the other hand, we have a story of religious experimentation and creativity. Women formed new religious organizations dedicated to an active life of engagement with the world and, at least initially, not confined within convent walls. In Italy, Angela Merici founded the first Ursuline congregation in 1535; in France, the Visitandines and the Congrégation de Notre Dame began as uncloistered congregations dedicated to serving the sick and the poor. However, by the mid-seventeenth century, some, such as Mary Ward's "English Ladies," had been suppressed, and almost all the others had been transformed into religious orders. Among the few to survive as an uncloistered congregation was the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Susan Dinan's book shows us how the Company and its leaders negotiated the tensions between order and creativity to achieve this status and open up new roles for women in nursing and poor relief.

The founders of the Company, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, both came from the margins of French society, which may help to account for what Dinan refers to as "the liminal status of the Company" (p. 5). The outlines of de Paul's life are well-known thanks to numerous biographies, the most recent by Bernard de Pujol.^[1] Born to a peasant family in 1581, de Paul went on to found the Congregation of the Mission, an order of priests known as "Lazarists" dedicated to serving the poor, and to become one of most important figures in the history of early modern poor relief. De Marillac's story is less familiar. The illegitimate daughter of a nobleman, her uncles were leaders of the Dévot party at court who got into trouble in the 1630s—one was imprisoned, the other executed—for supporting the queen against Richelieu. Despite an early desire to join a convent, Louise bowed to her father's wishes and married, but the death of her husband in 1625 freed her to pursue her religious mission. Like many of the women who made their mark on the Catholic Reformation in France—the mystic and missionary Marie de l'Incarnation, and the foundress of the Visitation order, Jeanne de Chantal, come to mind—widowhood offered Louise an opportunity for independence and the chance to expand her horizons beyond the sphere of wife and mother.

In 1617, Vincent de Paul founded the first Confraternity of Charity in the diocese of Châtillon-les-Dombes, near Lyon. The members of this confraternity were married women from the local elite who took turns visiting and feeding the poor and sick in their neighborhood. More confraternities were sponsored by Lazarist priests, who traveled across France teaching Christian doctrine to reinforce their mission, but did not remain in any area permanently. Dinan follows the standard narrative here in giving credit to de Paul for establishing the first confraternities; however, Barbara Diefendorf has argued that it was Marguerite de Silly—whose role Dinan does not mention—who provided the inspiration as well as the funding for the both the Congregation of the Mission and the first Confraternities of Charity.^[2]

In 1629, the confraternities around Paris were united into a single entity under the supervision of Louise de Marillac. De Marillac found that while the elite women in these confraternities had good intentions, they lacked the skills to perform the tasks required of them and often sent servants in their places. She came up with an innovative structure to solve this problem. She expanded the membership in the confraternity to include women from peasant and artisan backgrounds, and divided the confraternity into two groups: the elite “Ladies of Charity” who would be in charge of fundraising and managing the organization, and the “Daughters of Charity” who would carry out the actual work of serving the poor.

The new structure raised questions about how to define the organization, since the lifestyle of the Daughters, unmarried women who lived communally and took simple vows, closely resembled that of a religious order. De Paul and de Marillac strongly believed that enclosure would threaten the mission of the Company and worked hard to retain the unenclosed status of the Daughters. Why did they succeed where other congregations did not? Dinan offers a number of reasons: First, the economic crisis of the early seventeenth century created a huge need for poor relief which the Daughters of Charity helped fill. Second, the Company benefited from the patronage of powerful supporters who helped protect the Company from enclosure, and the Daughters developed alliances with local clerics and were careful not to challenge their authority. In addition, the Daughters were placed under the control of the Lazarists, which circumvented any future efforts by reforming bishops to impose the Tridentine decrees on the Company. Finally, de Paul and de Marillac worked strategically, even covertly, to distinguish the Company from a religious order, going so far as to “[misrepresent] the nature of the Community” (p. 44). One wonders to what extent they were able to “fool” Church officials, and to what extent these officials went along with this “misrepresentation” because of the valuable nature of the tasks performed by the Daughters. In any case, the success of their strategy resulted in the Company receiving papal approval as a confraternity in 1668.

Dinan goes on to examine the actual work that the Daughters did both at the parish level and in institutions such as foundling homes and hospitals. The period from 1633 to 1660 was one of great expansion, with establishments founded throughout France and even in Poland. Unlike most religious orders, the Daughters brought with them no dowries, so the Company was reliant on the patronage of wealthy women, many of whom were Ladies of Charity. The queen, Anne of Austria, provided an annual endowment for the Company which was continued by her husband Louis XIII after her death in 1666. The Daughters earned their own keep through sewing, spinning, and taking in laundry, work which also served to reinforce the strict division between Ladies and Daughters. The “*petit règlement*” drafted by Louise de Marillac in 1633 codified the organization of the Company. While it resembled a religious rule, it emphasized flexibility. Though the Daughters dressed alike, their clothes were modeled on the secular dress of peasant women that allowed them to blend into the communities they served. In contrast with the stability of nuns, the rules set up a rotation policy with pairs of Daughters sent to serve in a parish for a few years and then reassigned to a new one. In their parish work, the Daughters enjoyed an independence that allowed them to adapt to local needs.

In addition to caring for the poor and sick, the Daughters opened schools for poor girls. Like most of the teaching congregations of the time, their chief concern was the religious formation of their subjects. Here the Daughters had to be careful since the teaching of religion was traditionally associated with the priesthood. Louise de Marillac argued against using Bellarmine’s catechism, the standard work used by parish priests to teach children, because she feared it might encourage the Daughters to aspire to vain erudition, or that they might make errors trying to teach matters beyond their comprehension. However, she was overruled by Vincent de Paul, who seems to have had more confidence in the abilities and judgment of the Daughters. While it may seem ironic that de Marillac’s was the more conservative voice here, her hesitancy was surely based on an awareness of the practical problems raised by women teaching. After all, who but a woman would best understand the dangers of stepping out of one’s place? At other points, Louise seems to have been more radical in her approach towards education, as when she asked de Paul to allow the Daughters to accept poor boys into their free schools if there were no other

schooling options available to them. De Paul firmly denied this proposal for coeducation.

More ambitious still was the expansion of the Company's mission to include work in larger institutions such as hospitals and foundling homes. Sometimes the Company bit off more than it could chew, as when it took over the state foundling home of La Couche, which they moved to Bicêtre in the 1640s. By 1650 the project had been abandoned due to lack of funds. Such failures should not obscure the important role of the Company in the history of nursing. The Daughters managed and served in hospitals throughout France and introduced new standards of care and cleanliness that made these institutions safer and more efficient. Dinan argues convincingly that the Daughters made nursing a respectable profession two centuries before Florence Nightingale.

Dinan does a wonderful job placing the Daughters within the history of early modern attitudes towards poverty and the poor. The period saw a shift from a medieval view that normalized and even sanctified poverty, towards a view of the poor as criminal and dangerous and the distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. The increasing institutionalization of poor relief, in which the Daughters of Charity played an important role, was directed at the former. Dinan contributes to our understanding of this process by showing how the new ideas were implemented "from the bottom up" (p. 35).

However, Dinan tends to underplay the importance of class and social status as a determining factor that allowed the Company to remain unenclosed. While moving in the public sphere would have been incompatible with virtue for women of the elite, society would have found the same behavior much more acceptable on the part of peasant and artisan women. The impulse for enclosure often came not from the church but from elite families who feared not only for their daughters' reputations, but that the lack of formal vows would allow daughters to return home and make a claim on the family inheritance. These concerns would have been muted by the lower social status of the Daughters. And while Dinan's discussion of enclosure in the context of the Daughters of Charity is nuanced and convincing, her discussion of other congregations is less so. For example, she argues that enclosure transformed the missions of the Ursulines and the Visitandines, which is true enough, but she characterizes this as "a transition from active service to contemplative worship" (p. 59). An alternative explanation would be that these orders adapted their active mission to enclosure. She claims that after enclosure the Ursulines focused mainly on educating their elite boarders, but for many Ursulines, taking in boarders was a necessary evil that provided the income to support their central mission of educating poor girls.

After the deaths of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul in 1660, the Company continued to thrive, and by 1711 there were 250 houses in France, Belgium, and Poland. The founders left behind a centralized and efficient structure that helped ensure the smooth running of the organization once they were gone. Papal recognition freed the Company from the necessity of resisting enclosure, and in 1685, the Daughters adopted a new habit that gave them a more distinctive appearance. In the following centuries, the Daughters saw continued growth, even while other religious organizations shrank. Today about 21,500 Daughters of Charity work as nurses and teachers in over ninety countries.

How radical were the Daughters? Not in their actions, Dinan argues, since they engaged in tasks typically associated with women. However, the Daughters "subverted" the Council of Trent and were "transgressive" in their institutional status and violation of social convention. This ability to move back and forth between accepting and challenging traditional models of feminine behavior, that is, to negotiate the contradictory impulses of the Catholic Reformation, was typical not only of the Daughters but of women's involvement in the religious reforms of this period more broadly, as the work of historians like Elizabeth Rapley and Barbara Diefendorf has shown [3]. In addition to providing a much needed study of the particular history of the Daughters of Charity, Dinan's book deepens our understanding of women's religious experience and their contribution to religious change in Catholic Reformation France.

NOTES

[1] Bernard Pujo, *Vincent de Paul: The Trailblazer*, trans. Gertrud Graubart Champe (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

[2] Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 204-10.

[3] Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Buffalo, New York: McGill-Queen's University press, 1990); and Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*. See also Linda Lierheimer, "Preaching or Teaching? Defining the Ursuline Mission in Seventeenth-Century France," in Pamela Walker and Beverly Kienzle, eds., *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 212-26.

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